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ABSTRACT

This study was designed to answer the following questions relative to social science fair projects: (1) To what extent were instructional media techniques utilized in the project display? (2) To what extent did teachers assist students with topic selection for the projects? (3) To what extent were the teachers and media specialists involved with students in the research for the projects? (4) How much class time did students spend on project development? and (5) To what extent were parents involved in project development? In order to answer these questions, projects were photographed at a regional social science fair and evaluated. The researcher also attended briefing sessions for judges and listened to their rationales for selecting the award winners. A survey questionnaire was sent to the teachers of award winners to elicit further information. Two of the findings from the study indicated that winners received higher ratings from the researcher for visual presentation, and the judges revealed that the use of the scientific method was important in good research. (KM)

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Research and Display Attributes
of Social Science Fair Projects

by

Bonnie W. Loyless

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INTRODUCTION

Social science fairs are an important annual event in many schools. Winners of local social science fairs enter their projects in the regional social science fair and regional winners compete at the state level. Therefore, the development of a social science fair project requires effort on the part of the student, teacher, and media specialist.

Purposes of the Study

The purposes of the study were to: (1) analyze selected entries in the regional social science fair for incorporation of instructional media techniques, and (2) determine from sponsoring teachers of entries going to the state social science fair the procedures and techniques used for successful project development.

Justification for the Study

Social science fair projects that win rosettes or blue ribbons at the regional social science fair excel over other projects. An analysis of these winning projects may be useful in assisting students in development of future projects. Additionally, a knowledge of methods used by teachers in working with students in social science fair project development may assist other teachers in continuing work with students in social science fair project development.

Research Questions

The study was designed to answer the following questions relative to social science fair projects:

1. To what extent were instructional media techniques utilized in the project display?
2. To what extent did teachers assist student with topic selection for the projects?
3. To what extent were the teachers and media specialists involved with students in the research for the projects?
4. How much class time did students spend on project development?
5. To what extent were parents involved in project development?

RELATED LITERATURE

Literature related to social science fairs is limited. Two types of literature were found -- handbooks and journal articles. Both types were consulted to serve as a basis for the study.

Handbooks

Teachers whose students participate in social science fairs need resources to help them prepare students for the work involved in project development. Georgia schools participating in social science fairs this year received Georgia Social Science Fairs 1990-91 from the Georgia Department of Education (1990). Included in this handbook were social science fair goals, rules and regulations for

teachers and students, an explanation of the social science disciplines, information about local and regional fairs, a description of awards, and information for regional fair directors. Entry forms and judging forms were also included.

Similarly, other states conduct social science fairs for their students. For example, the Louisiana State Department of Education published Louisiana Social Studies Fairs: Bulletin 1133 as their guide for social science fairs (Louisiana State Department of Education, 1987). The Louisiana guidelines were very similar to the guidelines for Georgia. However, a few differences between the guidelines for the two states were noted:

1. Georgia divides grades 5-12 into 4 classes for judging with two grades in each class: 5-6, 7-8, 9-10, and 11-12. Louisiana divides grades 4-12 into three classes: 4-6, 7-8, and 9-12.
2. Georgia project displays were limited to a space of 30 inches front to back, 48 inches in width, and 60 inches in height. Louisiana project display limits were a space of 30 inches front to back, 36 inches in width, and 100 inches in height. Measurements for both states are maximums.
3. The Louisiana guide contained a lengthy section entitled, "The Basics of a Social Studies Project" which provided more specific information about the research paper

for students than the Georgia. Also included in the Louisiana guide were suggestions about instructional media techniques and the oral presentation, and guidelines for parental involvement.

Journal Articles

According to Charles R. Berryman, (1985) selection of topics for social science fair projects will determine the meaningfulness of results for the students. Social science fair projects should begin with a topic restricted in scope so that the student's efforts can lead them to careful, accurate methodology. "Of primary concern is the methodology, not the importance of results." (Berryman, 1985, p. 12) Through producing a social science fair project, students can get some sense of the differences between facts, concepts, and generalizations. Berryman recommended the following methodologies as appropriate for social science fair projects: questionnaires, case studies, interviews, participant observation, use of secondary data, historical interviews for local history, and research papers. Berryman also pointed out that projects could involve more than one method. All methods require interpretation and analysis by the student.

Teachers should evaluate projects on methodology rather than on visual appearance/neatness. A project that demonstrates the student's ability to perform some of the methods of social science should be evaluated higher than a

neat visual display on an insignificant topic. Superior social science fair projects result from creative research ideas executed with appropriate methods and carried out with accuracy. (Berryman, 1985)

Michael L. Hawkins (1986) wrote that the "decline of geography in schools and geography projects in social science fairs may be due to the removal of geography from the immediate world of the student." (p. 28) To encourage more geography projects, Hawkins proposed some appropriate questions or problems for students to investigate and some basic guidelines for structuring and carrying out a geography project. A project topic must be identified and be considered researchable. Methodology for conducting the geography project should involve the scientific method. (Hawkins, 1986)

In data collection, the student should select field study or library study for data collection, depending on the nature of the problem. In geography projects, descriptive information can often be translated into graphs, charts, maps, and diagrams. Hawkins cited sources for teachers and students to provide knowledge necessary for data collection and processing. The report of findings must be clearly organized and conclusions presented in an eye-catching manner. Teachers in other content areas should also be utilized in areas where their expertise will contribute. The subject of geography draws from many disciplines and

incorporating other disciplines will help the student relate geography to his immediate world. (Hawkins, 1986)

Summary

The handbooks available gave teachers information necessary to assist students in producing projects for social science fairs. Projects on the local level should aim for quality equal to regional and state social science fair winners.

Journal articles indicated that methodology is of primary importance. An attractive project display is worthless without a concisely stated problem and research to support it.

PROCEDURES

Data for this study was gathered in several ways. Projects for the regional social science fair at Georgia Southern University were evaluated for visual appearance and incorporation of instructional media. Judges for the social science fair were interviewed to identify criteria used in conjunction with the judging forms to determine winners. Data were also gathered through a survey of teachers whose students received rosettes or blue ribbons in the regional social science fair.

Description of the Instruments

Two instruments for collecting data were used: a project evaluation form and a teacher survey. The project evaluation form (see Appendix A) identified the project by

title, class, and discipline; a check list indicated the types of media used; a rating chart was used to evaluate projects for unity, line, shape, form, arrangement, balance, color, interaction, and lettering; and a space for comments was provided. This evaluation form was developed by the researcher and was based on one found in Instructional Media and the New Technologies of Instruction (Heinich, Molenda, & Russell, 1989, p. 83)

The survey instrument for teachers of students who had winning social science fair projects was developed by the researcher and is found in Appendix B. Teachers responded in item 1 as to how the social science fair project was introduced to the students. Items 2-4 dealt with student selection of project topics. Teaching research skills and the involvement of the media specialist were dealt with in items 5 and 6. Item 7 asked teachers if the projects were graded as one or two assignments. In items 8-10, the number of class periods and the number of weeks students worked on the projects were identified. Teachers also responded to questions about parental involvement, the age students are first exposed to social science fairs, and approaches used for working with students of different age groups. A space for additional comments was also provided.

Description of the Populations

The first population was the social science fair projects at the Regional Social Science Fair at Georgia

Southern University on March 2, 1991. The projects were observed on this date and photographs taken for later study. In each of Classes I, II, III, and IV two projects received rosettes. In Classes I and II, 27 projects received blue ribbons. There were 7 blue ribbons in classes III and IV.

The second population was the group of teachers of students who had winning social science fair projects. A total of 42 projects received either blue ribbons or rosettes. Several teachers had more than one student who received a ribbon or rosette. Therefore 25 teachers were included in the survey. Teachers surveyed teach at schools in the Statesboro Region, as identified by Georgia Social Science Fairs 1990-91. (Georgia Department of Education, 1990-91)

Procedures Followed

Projects at the Regional Social Science Fair were viewed and photographed on March 2, 1991. The researcher attended the briefing session for judges. Judges were interviewed by the researcher to obtain a description of qualities that made a project outstanding and qualities that characterized good student interviews.

The researcher received copies of the Judge's Score Cards for students who received rosettes or blue ribbons. Names and addresses for teachers of winning students were obtained from the Regional Social Science Fair coordinator. A survey questionnaire, cover letter, and postage-paid

return envelope were distributed to identified teachers in mid-March (see Appendix C). Prior to the deadline, a reminder letter was sent to teachers to remind teachers to return the completed questionnaire. Twenty of the 25 questionnaires were completed for a return rate of 80 percent.

FINDINGS

Evaluation of Visual Appearance and Incorporation of Media

The researcher attended the Regional Social Science Fair held at Georgia Southern University on March 2, 1991. Projects that won rosettes or blue ribbons were photographed. The researcher evaluated these projects using the Social Science Fair Evaluation form (see Appendix A). A comparison of the forms resulted in the following conclusions:

1. Project topics for Class III and Class IV involved more complex research than topics for Class I and Class II. For example, many Class III and IV project topics involved surveys whose results were incorporated into detailed graphs and charts. Many projects from Classes I and II also included charts and graphs but their analyses were not as detailed.
2. Projects in all classes incorporated a variety of media including models/realia, photographs, charts, and newspaper clippings in the displays. In Classes I and II, four projects incorporated the use of media which required

interaction with the viewer (audio cassette tape/player); in Classes III and IV only one project required such interaction.

3. Projects receiving rosettes received higher ratings from the researcher for arrangement, balance, color, shape, line and unity (see Appendix A).

Tips from Judges

On the day of the Regional Social Science Fair, the researcher attended the judges briefing session and heard comments made by judges as they reached a group decision for awarding ribbons and rosettes in each class. Judges comments indicated that in evaluating projects, they took the following into consideration:

1. For displays, important information should be large with less important information being smaller.
2. Research is of primary importance. The use of the scientific method should be clear.
3. The project must reflect research and be able to stand on its own.
4. For the interview, the student must understand all factors involved in the report. For example, in one project dealing with waste disposal, the student did not know why styrofoam and diapers were a problem other than the fact that there are a lot of them.
5. If two students do a project, both should be able to explain the project to judges. The project should explain

itself, but the student should be prepared to answer questions asked by the judges. Students should refrain from talking more than necessary.

6. Judges suggested that students practice interviewing. Students should practice telling the hypothesis, procedure, and conclusion.

7. If a student's research included surveys, the student should know the breakdown of those interviewed for age, gender, etc.

The Survey

For the purposes of this study, survey findings were divided into two age groups: grades 5-8 (Middle School) and grades 9-12 (High School). Response totals for grades 5-12 are also given.

Research Question 1

How was the social science fair project introduced to your students, as a required activity or as an optional activity?

Table 1. Introduction of social science fair projects to students

	Middle School (N=15)	High School (N=5)	Total (N=20)
Required activity	7	3	10
Optional activity	8	2	10

The data summarized in Table 1 indicate that overall teachers were evenly split in the way they introduced the social science fair to students.

Research Question 2

Did your students select a specific social science fair project topic before or after going to the media center for research?

Table 2. Social science fair project topic selection
(Part 1)

	Middle School (N=15)	High School (N=4)	Total (N=19)
Before	12	4	16
After	3	0	3

Eighty percent of Middle School teachers and 100 percent of high school teachers reported that their students selected social science fair project topics before going to the media center for research. Only 20 percent of middle school students selected project topics after going to the media center for research.

Research Question 3

If students decided on a specific topic after going to the media center for research, did they choose this topic from a list of possible topics (such as a narrowed down list of three)?

Table 3. Social science fair project topic selection
(Part 2)

	Middle School (N=3)	High School (N=0)	Total (N=3)
Yes	1	0	1
No	2	0	2

Of all teachers surveyed, only 3 middle school teachers indicated that students selected project topics after going

to the media center for research. Of these three teachers, only one teacher indicated that students selected the final topic from a narrowed down list of possible topics.

Research Question 4

How was the final topic selected?

Table 4. Final topic selection

	Middle School (N=13)	High School (N=4)	Total (N=17)
Student choice	3	2	5
Student choice with teacher input	0	2	2
Student/parent/ teacher	2	0	2
Student/teacher/ media specialist	5	0	5
Student interest/ available material	3	0	3

Teachers surveyed indicated that final topics were selected by student choice along with input from others including teacher, parents, and media specialist. At the high school level, the choice was primarily that of the student. At the middle school level, other persons contributed to the choice.

Research Question 5

How involved with student research was your media specialist?

Table 5. Amount of media specialist involvement in student research

	Middle School (N=14)	High School (N=5)	Total (N=19)
Very involved	3	3	6
Somewhat involved	6	2	8
Little involved	3	0	3
Not involved	2	0	2

Research indicated that overall, there is more involvement than non-involvement by media specialists in student research. Media specialist involvement is fairly evenly split in middle schools. In high schools, all teachers surveyed indicated that media specialists are either somewhat involved or very involved.

Research Question 6

Who taught/guided students in learning research skills needed for social science fair projects, teacher or media specialist?

Table 6. Who taught research skills?

	Middle School (N=15)	High School (N=5)	Total (N=20)
Teacher	12	2	14
Media Specialist	0	0	0
Both	3	3	6

In middle schools, more teachers than media specialists were involved in teaching research skills to students. In high schools, teaching research skills was split between

teacher alone or teacher and media specialist. In neither case, was this the sole job of the media specialist.

Research Question 7

Did you approach social science fair projects as one assignment (research paper and display) or as two assignments (research paper separate from display assignment)?

Table 7. Were projects graded as one or two assignments?

	Middle School (N=15)	High School (N=5)	Total (N=20)
One assignment	9	3	12
Two assignments	6	2	8

In both middle schools and high schools, sixty percent of the teachers graded social fair projects as one assignment and forty percent graded them as two assignments.

Research Question 8

If you viewed the social science fair projects as two assignments, approximately how much time did you allow for each part, research paper and display?

Table 8. How much time did you allow for research paper and display?

Number of weeks	Research Paper		
	Middle School (N=6)	High School (N=2)	Total (N=8)
3	3	0	3
4	2	0	2
8	1	0	1
10	0	1	1
18	0	1	1
Number of weeks	Display		
	Middle school (N=6)	High School (N=2)	Total (N=8)
1	1	0	1
2	4	0	4
3	1	0	1
4	0	2	2

In middle schools a shorter amount of time was allowed for the research paper and for the display, with middle school students spending between 3 and 8 weeks on the paper and 1 to 3 weeks on the display. High school students spent 10 to 18 weeks on the research paper and 4 weeks on the display.

Research Question 9

How many weeks prior to the local social science fair did your students begin working on the social science fair projects? (Let project topic selection be the beginning).

Table 9. Number of weeks to complete project

	Middle School (N=15)	High School (N=5)	Total (N=20)
3	1	0	1
4	4	0	4
6	3	0	3
8	2	1	3
10	2	1	3
12	3	0	3
15	0	2	2
24	0	1	1

It seemed there was no pattern with regard to the number of weeks students had to complete their projects. However, high school students were allowed a longer period of time to complete their projects than middle school students.

Research Question 10

How many class periods did your students spend in the media center for research?

Table 10. Number of class periods for research in media center

	Middle School (N=12)	High School (N=4)	Total (N=16)
1	1	0	1
2	1	0	1
4	3	1	4
5	2	2	4
6	2	0	2
8	0	1	1
12	1	0	1
15	2	0	2

There is no evident pattern to the number of class periods students spend in the media center for research. However, overall, most spent 5-6 class periods.

Research Question 11

How much do you think parents were involved with your students in the development of their social science fair projects? much, somewhat, or little involvement.

Table 11. Amount of parental involvement in projects

	Middle School (N=14)	High School (N=4)	Total (N=18)
Much involved	4	0	4
Somewhat involved	8	3	11
Little involvement	2	1	3

There is parental involvement in middle school and high schools, but parents of high school students are less involved than those of middle school students.

Research Question 12

In your school/school system, in what grade do your students have their first exposure to social science fair projects?

Table 12. Grade students begin social science fair projects

Grade	Middle School (N=15)	High School (N=3)	Total (N=18)
4	1	1	2
5	11	1	12
6	3	0	3
8	0	1	1

Many schools/school systems seem to stress social science fair involvement in the middle grades, especially at the fifth grade level.

Research Question 13

If you worked with students in different grades (ex. you have students in more than one class - Class I, II, III, or IV), did you use different approaches in working with the different classes? Responses were choices of yes, no, or I worked only with one class group.

Table 13. Did you use different approaches in working with different classes?

	Middle School (N=14)	High School (N=2)	Total (N=16)
Yes	0	0	0
No	4	2	6
Worked only with one Class	10	0	10

Most teachers worked with only one Class group. Teachers who worked with more than one Class group did not use any different approach with the students.

Research Question 14

Other comments.

Comments received were grouped in six categories:

1. Students also used the public library, and parents provided transportation.
2. Student conducted field research, and parents provided transportation.
3. Students enjoyed conducting interviews and completing surveys.
4. One teacher was concerned that judges at the region fair gave a grade but provided no comments.
5. The teacher had to do it all - introduce, teach research skills, and help with displays.
6. One respondent was a county coordinator and felt that students had too much parental involvement.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The study was designed to answer the following questions relative to social science fair projects:

1. To what extent were instructional media techniques utilized in the social science fair project display?
2. To what extent did the teacher assist the student with topic selection for the project?
3. To what extent were the teacher and media specialist involved with social science fair project research?
4. How much class time did students spend on project development?

5. To what extent were parents involved in social science fair project development?

Data for the study were gathered in three ways. First, the researcher attended the Regional Social Science Fair at Georgia Southern University on March 2, 1991. Photographs of projects winning blue ribbons or rosettes were taken. The researcher evaluated these projects using the Social Science Fair Project Evaluation form (see Appendix A). Second, the researcher attended the briefing session for judges and heard comments made by judges as they reached a group decision for awarding ribbons and rosettes in each class. Third, a survey questionnaire was sent to teachers of students who won blue ribbons or rosettes. Twenty-five surveys were mailed with 20 surveys returned for a return rate of 80 percent.

Discussion

The evaluation of projects for incorporation of media indicated that all displays used a variety of media. Few projects required interaction with the viewer. Rosette winners received higher ratings from the researcher for arrangement, balance, color, shape, line and unity.

Tips from judges revealed that the use of scientific method in good research is important. Regarding the display, important information should be larger than less important information. In the use of interviews, students should understand all factors in the research and should

practice interviewing. Student interaction during judging should serve to answer any questions of the judges but the project should be able to stand on its own.

The survey indicated that students selected project topics before going to the media center for research 80 percent of the time. Final topic selection is made by student choice or with input from parents, teacher, or media specialist; available material was also a factor. Research skills were taught mostly by teachers but there was also a joint effort of teacher and media specialist. More time was allowed for project development in high schools than in middle schools. More parental involvement in projects was recorded for middle schools than for high schools. Most teachers worked only with one Class group so different approaches were not needed.

Since the survey was sent to a small number of teachers, the results might be different if a larger sample was used. However, this information can be useful to teachers whose students participate in social science fairs.

Suggestions for Further Research

Further study is needed to compare these survey results with results from a similar survey in other regions in the state. A similar survey for teachers of all students competing at the State Social Science Fair would provide broader input and would assist teachers throughout the state.

Survey results indicate that teaching research skills was done by the teacher alone or an effort of the teacher and media specialist. In this responsibility, the teacher should involve the media specialist more.

Fifth grade seems to be a prominent starting point for students working with social science fair projects. Some teachers may feel the need for more training in methods of working with students on social science fair projects. This training could be provided through workshops or staff development programs.

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APPENDIX A

SOCIAL SCIENCE FAIR PROJECT EVALUATION

PROJECT NUMBER _____

TITLE _____

DISCIPLINE:

☐ Anthropology ☐ Economics
☐ Geography ☐ History
☐ Political Science
☐ Sociology-Social psychology

Grade Level: Class I (5-6) Class III (9-10) _____
 Class II (7-8) Class IV (11-12) _____

Type of media used: (check all that apply)

☐ display board
☐ written report
☐ audio cassette tape/player
☐ video tape/player
☐ models/realia
☐ photographs
☐ charts
☐ slide/tape
☐ other (specify) _____

Does display require action/interaction with viewer? _____

Rating:	High	Medium	Low
Unity: limited to a single main idea	-	-	-
Line: suggests action, direction and movement	-	-	-
Shape: easily interpreted; contributes	-	-	-
Form: enhances interest or effect of visual	-	-	-
Arrangement: geometric shapes or letters as frameworks; "rule of thirds"	-	-	-
Balance: elements equally distributed on each side	-	-	-
Color: simple, analogous; contrast for emphasis and legibility	-	-	-
Interaction: gets learner involved	-	-	-
Lettering: simple style; contrast with background; 1/4 inch per eight feet of viewer distance; optical spacing	-	-	-

Comments: _____

APPENDIX B

SURVEY FOR TEACHERS OF STUDENTS WHO HAVE WINNING SOCIAL SCIENCE FAIR PROJECTS

Please answer the following questions by either circling or checking the appropriate response or by writing in information.

1. How was the social science fair project introduced to your students?

- _____a. as a required activity
 _____b. as an optional activity

2. Did your students select a specific social science fair project topic before or after going to the media center for research?

_____before

_____after

3. If they decided on a specific topic after going to the media center for research did they choose this topic from a list of possible topics (such as a narrowed down list of three)?

_____yes

_____no

4. How was the final topic selected?

5. How involved with student research was your media specialist?

- _____very involved
 _____somewhat involved
 _____little involved
 _____not involved

6. Who taught/guided students in learning research skills needed for social science fair projects, teacher or media specialist?

_____teacher

_____media specialist

_____both

7. Did you approach social science fair projects as one assignment (research paper and display) or as two assignments (research paper separate from display assignment)?

_____One assignment

_____Two assignments

8. If you viewed the social science fair projects as two assignments, approximately how much time did you allow for each part, research paper and display?

research paper _____weeks

display _____weeks

9. How many weeks prior to the local social science fair did your students begin working on the social science fair projects? (Let project topic selection be the beginning)?

_____ weeks

10. How many class periods did your students spend in the media center for research?

_____ class periods for research

11. How much do you think parents were involved with your students in the development of their social science fair projects?

much involved somewhat involved little involvement

12. In your school/school system, in what grade do your students have their first exposure to social science fair projects?

_____ grade

13. If you worked with students in different grades (ex. you have students in more than one class - Class I, II, III, or IV), did use different approaches in working with the different classes?

yes no I worked only with one class group

If you answered "yes", what activities did you do with each class level?

14. Other comments:

If you would like to receive a summary of survey information, please put your name and address below.